

## Station Island, Part XII

Like a convalescent, I took the hand  
stretched down from the jetty, sensed again  
an alien comfort as I stepped on ground

to find the helping hand still gripping mine,  
fish-cold and bony, but whether to guide  
or to be guided I could not be certain

for the tall man in step at my side  
seemed blind, though he walked straight as a rush  
upon his ash plant, his eyes fixed straight ahead.

Then I knew him in the flesh  
out there on the tarmac among the cars,  
wintered hard and sharp as a blackthorn bush.

His voice eddying with the vowels of all rivers  
came back to me, though he did not speak yet,  
a voice like a prosecutor's or a singer's,

Cunning, narcotic, mimic, definite  
as a steel nib's downstroke, quick and clean,  
and suddenly he hit a litter basket

with his stick, saying, 'Your obligation  
is not discharged by any common rite.  
What you do you must do on your own.

The main thing is to write  
for the joy of it. Cultivate a work-lust  
that imagines its haven like your hands at night

dreaming the sun in the sunspot of a breast.  
You are fasted now, light-headed, dangerous.  
Take off from here. And don't be so earnest,

so ready for the sackcloth and the ashes.

Let go, let fly, forget.

You've listened long enough. Now strike your note.'

It was as if I had stepped free into space  
alone with nothing that I had not known  
already. Raindrops blew in my face

as I came to and heard the harangue and jeers  
going on and on. 'The English language  
belongs to us. You are raking at dead fires,

rehearsing the old whinges at your age.

That subject people stuff is a cod's game,  
infantile, like this peasant pilgrimage.

You lose more of yourself than you redeem  
doing the decent thing. Keep at a tangent.

When they make the circle wide, it's time to swim

out on your own and fill the element  
with signatures on your own frequency,  
echo-soundings, searches, probes, allurements,

elver-gleams in the dark of the whole sea.'

The shower broke in a cloudburst, the tarmac

fumed and sizzled. As he moved off quickly

the downpour loosed its screens round his straight walk.